

Attraction and Rejection (Part 15)

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4.3 Rejection in childhood

Peer rejection has been measured using sociometry and other rating methods. Studies typically show that some children are popular, receiving generally high ratings, many children are in the middle, with moderate ratings, and a minority of children is rejected, showing generally low ratings. One measure of rejection asks children to list peers they like and dislike. Rejected children receive few "like" nominations and many "dislike" nominations. Children classified as *neglected* receive few nominations of either type.

According to Karen Bierman of Pennsylvania State University, most children who are rejected by their peers display one or more of the following behavior patterns:

1. Low rates of prosocial behavior, e.g. taking turns, sharing.
2. High rates of aggressive or disruptive behavior.
3. High rates of inattentive, immature, or impulsive behavior.
4. High rates of social anxiety.

Bierman states that well-liked children show social savvy and know when and how to join play groups. Children who are at risk for rejection are more likely to barge in disruptively, or hang back without joining at all. Aggressive children who are athletic or have good social skills are likely to be accepted by peers, and they may become ringleaders in the harassment of less skilled children. Minority children, children with disabilities, or children who have unusual characteristics or behavior may face greater risks of rejection. Depending on the norms of the peer group, sometimes even minor differences among children lead to rejection or neglect. Children who are less outgoing or simply prefer solitary play are less likely to be rejected than children who are socially inhibited and show signs of insecurity or anxiety (Bierman, K. L., 2003).



Rejected children are more likely to be bullied at school and on playgrounds. Peer rejection, once established, tends to be stable over time, and thus difficult for a child to overcome (Cillessen, A., Bukowski, W. M., & Haselager, G., 2000). Researchers have found that active rejection is more stable, more harmful, and more likely to persist after a child transfers to another school, than simple neglect (Bierman, K. L., 2003). One reason for this is that peer groups establish reputational biases that act as stereotypes and influence subsequent social interaction (Hymel, S., Wagner, E., & Butler, L. J., 1990). Thus, even when rejected and popular children show similar behavior and accomplishments, popular children are treated much more favorably.

Rejected children are likely to have lower self-esteem, and to be at greater risk for *internalizing* problems like depression (McDougall, P., Hymel, S., Vaillancourt, T., & Mercer, L., 2001). Some rejected children display *externalizing* behavior and show aggression rather than depression. The research is largely correlational, but there is evidence of reciprocal effects. This means that children with problems are more likely to be rejected, and this rejection then leads to even greater problems for them. Chronic peer rejection may lead to a negative developmental cycle that worsens with time (Coie, J. D., 1990).

Rejected children are more likely to be bullied and to have fewer friends than popular children, but these conditions are not always present. For example, some popular children do not have close friends, whereas some rejected children do. Peer rejection is believed to be less damaging for children with at least one close friend.

An analysis of 15 school shootings between 1995 and 2001 found that peer rejection was present in all but two of the cases (87%). The documented rejection experiences included both acute and chronic rejection and frequently took the form of ostracism, bullying, and romantic rejection. The authors stated that although it is likely that the rejection experiences contributed to

the school shootings, other factors were also present, such as depression, poor impulse control, and other psychopathology (Leary, M. R., Kowalski, R. M., & Smith, L., 2003).

There are programs available for helping children who suffer from social rejection. One large scale review of 79 controlled studies found that social skills training is very effective ($r = .40$ effect size), with a 70% success rate, compared to 30% success in control groups. There was a decline in effectiveness over time, however, with follow-up studies showing a somewhat smaller effect size ($r = .35$) (Schneider, B. H., 1992).

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